

Dynamism of Spiritual Growth in Buddhism within the framework of Samsāric Continuance

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Anamataggā'yaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro pubbā koṭi na paññāyati avijjānīvaraṇānaṃ sattānaṃ taṇhāsaṃyojanānaṃ sandhāvataṃ saṃsarataṃ. [SN.II.178]. Let me begin without any trepidation with the declaration that if the notion of Saṃsāra was not conceived, there would be no Nirvana, and that in their absence there would have been no system of thought known to the world as Buddhism of Śākya-muni Buddha. In other words, I would not propose to talk on any aspect of Buddhism without a serious awareness of all aspects of Saṃsāra and their implications. As far as I can see, even a pre-enlightenment Buddha aspirant had enough vision to conceive this. Note what he says at SN.II.10: *Pubbe'va me bhikkhave abhisambodhā anabisambuddhassa bodhisattass'eva sato etadahosi. Kicchaṃ vatā'yaṃ loko āpanno jāyati ca jīyati ca mīyati ca cavati ca upapajjati ca.* This in brief is the Buddhist concept of Saṃsāric *dukkha*.

It is this vision of Saṃsāra which prompted our Buddha aspirant to look out for a scheme of salvation or *nissaraṇa* out of it. That and that alone, I would say, is Buddhism. At this stage, let me hasten to add that this tremendous concept of Saṃsāra is not necessarily a monopoly of the Buddhists. Life continuance from death to a birth, again and again, was something well known in Indian philosophical thinking. 'He who knows not the identity of the Cosmic Generator **Brahman** with its personal reflection in **ātman**, i.e. seeing the two as distinctly apart, goes from death to death again and again,' they say. This is how they put it: *mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyuṃ āpnoti ya iha nāne'va paśyati.*

This makes our Buddha come out with the very clear thesis that all he preaches to the world [*paññāpemi*] is only about this **dukkha** and its cessation or **nirodha** [*Pubbe cā'haṃ bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañ c'eva paññāpemi*

dukkhassa ca nirodham. MN. I. 140 in the Alagaddūpama Sutta]. Without a genuine awareness of this painful situation of *jāti 'pi dukkhā jarā 'pi dukkhā* etc. in Saṃsāric continuance, there cannot arise any religiousness or spirituality in Buddhism. Buddhist spirituality is the endeavor for the transcendental attainment of something beyond the world. It is therein alone that *dukkha* would cease to exist, i.e. *lokuttara*.

Here we must immediately be reminded that Buddhism offers no external **other power** [*ta riki*] to assist beings of the world in this process of spiritual uplift. *Attāṇo loko anabhissaro*: the world is without an external refuge, providing religious shelter and security. It is also without a controller of one's religious destiny. So says the Raṭṭhapāla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [MN. II. 68]. The concept of grace [*Dhātuḥ prasāda*] from an eternal Supreme Power is totally rejected. Not even via his appointed emissaries like the Bodhisattvas [Kuan Yin etc.] of the Mahāyāna. Hence Buddhism expects no offer from the devotee of any *bhakti* or self-engagement through dedication to a divine source of power.

For the growth of spiritual power needed for self redemption of each one, Buddhism requires the gradual reclamation and development of one's latent power within one's self [Let us remind ourselves here of the *bodhicitta* or enlightenment potential latent within each one of us, as indicated in the Mahayana teachings.]. In the primary teachings of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, the way to its achievement is indicated as the *Magga* or the Path. With unmistakable clarity, the *Magga* marks out the path along which the spiritual journey to Nirvana has to be undertaken. A being of the world is seen standing somewhere, well outside the runway from whence the journey has to be undertaken.

The Buddhist carrier to Nirvana has to be on a specific runway and on no other. The passenger to Nirvana has to be within the aircraft. There is an unmistakable point of start, even for the preliminary taxing, before a triumphant take off. Taking the imagery from elsewhere for a change, the aspirant to Nirvana

has to be within a satellite, correctly mounted on the launch-pad at NASA or elsewhere. During the countdown, it must be established that everything is in perfect order and that the engines of the satellite can produce the necessary power to extricate itself out of the earth's gravitational pull. Do we know that many expensively built satellites like the Jupiter commissioned by the Germans had to have its engines completely replaced before its final take off. All these clearly indicate the need for a self-generated dynamism in the spiritual growth of the Buddhist in pursuit of his Nirvana. The journey to Nirvana, we believe, was conceived and carried out exactly on those lines of outer space conquest, antedating the event by more than two millennia.

Let us now start with the Truth of the Way or *Magga Sacca* which is referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path or the *Ariyo Atthangiko Maggo*. We are of the definite opinion that it is a spiritual way of successive gradual development, leading on a pathway of upward ascent. Each stage of the Path, from the very first one of corrected vision or *sammā diṭṭhi* is said to generate or give rise to [pahoti] the succeeding one. See the statement *sammā diṭṭhissa sammā sarikkappo pahoti* etc. in the Janavasabha Sutta at DN. II. 217 and in the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta at MN. III.76. A closer study of *sammā diṭṭhi* itself, if properly carried out, should reveal to any student of Buddhism the tremendous dynamism contained within it. The acquisition of *sammā diṭṭhi* immediately implies a momentous tearing off from one territory of belief and moving over to another of almost polarized difference. This, we believe, is the implication of statements like *ujugatā 'ssa diṭṭhi, āgato imaṃ saddhammaṃ* etc. in the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [MN. I. 46], expressed by no less distinguished a person like our Venerable Sariputta. The Mahāvedalla Sutta [at MN.I.294] tells us that the genesis of *sammā diṭṭhi* takes place through being correctly informed [*parato ghoso*] of the dhamma, together with one's own correct reflection upon it [*yoniso ca manasikāro*].

This *ujugatā'ssa diṭṭhi* also implies the immediate acceptance of the Buddha

as one's spiritual guide with the unequivocal utterance of *Buddham saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, not once, but thrice over with *dutiyaṃ 'pi* and *tatiyaṃ 'pi* as well. The Buddhist cannot afford to keep Buddha as a distant consultant, hired only for pro tem use, to be resorted to only in crisis situations. Crises in one's life can be averted [not ones like tsunami], only by tracing one's life path in the way the Buddha has indicated. This role of being the unfailing guide of humans, both for their daily living in this world, and for their ultimate deliverance from the long-range ills of Saṃsāra is the part played by his teachings under the name of dhamma, even long before the subdivision of dhamma into higher and lower grades as dhamma and abhidhamma in subsequent years in the hands of competitive dhamma handlers.

We would now declare without any hesitation that the spiritual growth in the life a Buddhist is already signaled with his unambiguous entry into the dhamma via *sammā diṭṭhi* [i.e. *āgato imaṃ saddhammaṃ*]. There can be no better guide to detect and keep track of this Nirvana-ward spiritual evolution than a non-pedagogical but meticulous scrutiny of the emergence of the subsequent stages of spiritual [or religious, if you prefer] growth as one proceeds further and further through the succeeding stages of the Noble Eightfold Path. [I would make no secret that one could fundamentally disagree with us on the use of the word **succeeding** in this context. Let us agree to disagree, if necessary.].

At stage No.2 of the Path, i.e. at *sammā saṅkappa*, the disciple is called upon to re-set his thinking pattern [*saṅkappa*] or outlook as a Buddhist. On accepting the Buddhist creed by one's own choice, one has to submit oneself to be corrected on the required new pattern of thinking in the Buddhist way. Do the modern Buddhist Path Developers, anywhere and everywhere, who are vastly organized at global levels, or less organized, ever speak of these preliminaries. Large chunks of rock blasted out of quarries cannot be immediately used to pave the floors of palatial mansions, of more or less affluent people. They need to be cut, polished and put through many other processes before they are ready for

meaningful use.

This item No.2 [*sammā saṅkappa*] of the Path has three divisions for careful scrutiny. The very first of these, namely *nekkhamma saṅkappa* [eschewal of ceaseless pursuit or chasing after pleasure and placed as opposed to *kāma-saṅkappa*], when viewed from any angle of modern psycho-ethical thinking in the world, would place Buddhism in a very prestigious position in the realm of thinkers. Can we honestly ask and find an acceptable answer to this question whether Buddhists in any part of the world today begin their religious life of being a Buddhist with an awareness of this preliminary requirement of *sammā saṅkappa*?

However, in many parts of the sober world, beginning with the USA, quite apart from their religious alignments, people are now beginning to uphold the virtue of **delay gratification** [as opposed to consumerism] in the philosophy of daily living. It is for this fundamental religious grooming that the Buddha, more than two and a half millennia ago, pronounced this idea of *nekkhamma saṅkappa* as a pre-requisite Buddhist religious living. This indeed has to be viewed as the very commencement of spirituality in Buddhism. This is said to be the very spirit of Buddhism: *virāgāya dhamme desiyamāne*. Release in Nirvana is also finally achieved through detachment [*virāgā vimuccati*].

The dynamism of this change of heart to move from the gross gratification of sensory demands of the world or to renounce them is explicitly contained under the word *veramani* which is contained in all the restrictive regulations which come under *sīla* or moral regulation. In fact, we should here draw attention as to what should be the correct pronunciation of the word in its daily use, breaking it at the correct place as *ve + ramaṇī* and not meaninglessly as *vera + maṇī*. These precepts are each referred to as *veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ* or injunctions leading to detachment or renouncing each of the gross practices referred to under them such as killing [*pāṇātipātā*] or stealing [*adinnādānā*]. The move in this direction, we unhesitatingly call spiritual growth. It is in recognition of the basic value of this

restrictive detachment, of moving away from the clumsy gratification of worldly sensory demands that Buddhism views this primary stage of *sīla* as the very foundation for the build up of spirituality or basic moral goodness in human life. *Sīle patiṭṭhāya naro sapañño cittaṃ paññañ ca bhāvayaṃ* [= Founded on basic moral goodness, a wise human shall develop the culture of his mind and acquire the wisdom that shall ensue.] runs the regular refrain for the threefold spiritual culture or *tisso sikkhā* of Buddhism.

What I have endeavored to explain so far is the genesis and growth of the process of spiritual culture within a human in terms of Buddhism, and that within the time period of birth to death. But we have announced at the very outset in our title that we view it as being multi-dimensional or Saṃsāric, i.e. extending beyond one life-time, both forward and backwards. We firmly maintain that human life, as we see it here before us, has come into existence on account of a generic force which has been active prior to this life. This is contained in the trio *avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā saṅkhāra paccayā viññāṇaṃ* which constitutes the first phase of the Twelve Link Chain of Causal Genesis or **Paṭiccasamuppāda**.

At every stage in this process of Samsaric continuance, Viññāṇa stands visibly contained as the trans-samsaric life-carrier of the human [having also implanted itself in the mother's womb in the company of the *nāma-rūpa* provided by the parents] and is referred to as the *Samvattanika-viññāṇa* at MN.II.262 and as *Viññāṇa-sota* at DN.III.105. At this stage, it is to be clearly noted and remembered that all Samsāra-building defiling traits of the human, i.e. *āśya* and *anusaya*, are indelibly recorded in the transmigrating consciousness [See Mahamalunkyaputta Sutta at MN.I.433]. Hence it is impossible for us to maintain that the human mind, at any stage in its Saṃsāric continuance, is in a state of pristine purity. This stage is tenable only after the attainment of the state of Nirvana, of course in this very life itself.

At this stage of Nirvana, the mind of the human, while still living in the world, does not fix itself on any single thing which **leads to *saṅkhāra*-building** which in

turn **leads to Saṃsāra prolonging**. As far as the person who has reached his Nirvana in this very life, i.e. become totally freed or ***vimuttacitta***, this position is very clearly indicated in the Alagaddūpama Sutta [at MN.I. 140] as *Evaṃ vimuttacittam kho bhikkhave bhikkhum sa-Indā sa-Brahmakā sa-Pajāpatikā anvesaṃ nāddhigaccanti idaṃ nisitaṃ tathāgatassa viññāṇan'ti. Taṃ kissa hetu. Diṭṭhe' v'āhaṃ bhikkhave dhamme tathāgataṃ ananuvejjo' ti vadāmi*. And at SN.I. 155 the same situation is more specifically presented in the story of the Arhant Godhika: *Appapatiṭṭhitena ca bhikkhave viññāṇena Godhiko kulaputto parinibbuto' ti*. The conclusion is that arhants do not live in the world with traceable *viññāṇas*. They have ascended above the world. They are ***lokuttara***.

The very opposite of this position is the ***avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā*** in the trio we quoted above from the **Paṭiccasamuppāda**, as operating in one's previous life, planning Throughout one's Saṃsāric journeying one keeps building one' life momentum in saṅkhāra. Spiritual growth in Buddhism works in the opposite direction of undoing this build-up. Thus we have to see that in human life, Saṃsāric continuance and spiritual growth work in inverse ratio. Spiritual growth in Buddhism must be totally geared for the complete arrest of Saṃsāric continuance.